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# THE ETHNOGRAPHIC MOMENT: EVENT AND DEBATE IN MEDIATIZED FIELDWORK

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*This article introduces the term 'the ethnographic moment', which takes up and 'plays' with the long-disputed 'ethnographic present' in anthropology, as an indicator of changing conditions and requirements for ethnography in the context of mass media and mediation. It argues that event and debate, rather than structure and practice, have become pivotal aspects in thinking and conducting fieldwork that has to deal with the ephemeral. At the same time, it tries to show that an unquestioning acceptance of technological advancement and speed of societal change immunizes us to the thinkable absence of media and obscures analysis of lasting states of injustice and inequality in whose (re-)production they have a stake.*

**Keywords:** anthropology, media contents, social change, technology, time

The question of time is at the heart of the anthropological discipline. Indeed, time is what confronts anthropology with itself. This might explain why there have been very few scholars who have dealt with it in a profound manner (Falk Moore, 1987; Rabinow and Marcus, 2008). Johannes Fabian's work, highly contested when first published in the early 1980s, still stands out today. He laid bare that anthropology's conventional construction of its object – the Other in terms of 'different', 'observable' and hence 'describable' cultures – was intrinsically temporal in terms of being allochronistic. The practice of 'giving accounts of other cultures and societies in the present tense' (Fabian, 2002 [1983]: 80), sometimes years after having left the field, denied the simultaneity of the ethnographic Other and thus complicated an understanding of the discipline as an equitable – 'coeval' in Fabian's terms – dialogue with its interlocutors in commonly experienced, ongoing time.

Meanwhile, the 'Writing Culture' debate of the 1980s, to which Fabian was a decisive contributor, is often taken as the cathartic process of introspection that 'cleared' anthropology of most, if not all, skeletons in its (basically colonial) cupboard. The debate signified and critically assessed the limits of positivist science and the implied crisis of ethnographic representation.<sup>1</sup> What had been commonly termed the 'ethnographic present', epitomized in a sentence such as 'the X are matrilineal' (Fabian, 2002 [1983]: 81), duly came under scrutiny, and 'the transitory, deterritorialized, unfixed, processual character of much of what we study' (Malkki, 1997: 86) has been largely accepted in its wake, leaving the choice of tense to the reasoning of the individual author.

Today, however, the study of the (mass) media as an increasingly ubiquitous and integral factor in (all) our lives, which neither Fabian nor other Writing Culture discussants considered then, confront us anew and in a different way with the temporal dimensions of our work. Accelerated technological and social change, and the continuous production of the momentary and the ephemeral via the media virtually enforce a re-assessment of the relations between reality and representation and thus 'between a certain type of political cosmology (defining relations with the Other in temporal terms) and a certain type of epistemology (conceiving of knowledge as the reproduction of an observed world)' (Fabian, 2002 [1983]: 87).

Anthropological responses to this new dimension suggest that the discipline has largely failed to incorporate Fabian's early elaborations, though. This relates to the fact that the challenge of breaking disciplinary boundaries, which media ethnography entails, concerns not merely different disciplines but also boundaries within anthropology. The 'media revolution', as an integral part of globalization, was one decisive source of the vocabulary of change and transformation, which became paradigmatic for anthropology as well during the 1990s (Appadurai, 1996). Yet, the larger discipline had, and continues to have, a hard time accepting the media into its fold and has been somewhat eager to relegate respective ethnographies and also theoretical advances to the 'emerging subfield', as it is now often called, of media anthropology. It is indeed striking how frequently its practitioners and proponents themselves feel compelled to point out that media anthropology has been a latecomer – and how thriving it is now. The historically unequal relationship between anthropologist and object almost seems reified in the relationship between the discipline and new media-related ethnography: the latter is kept in some state of permanent postponement and temporal subordination so as to avert an introspection of the former.

Dealing with temporality in media anthropology is thus infused with a double catching-up syndrome and appears to be driven by compensation rather than innovation. The ephemeral character not only of technology but also particularly of mass-mediated contents undermines representational efforts even of processes. This has remained both a central and a circumvented problem. Instead, there is a noticeable tendency of taking into account an increasing breadth of media-related aspects in individual studies, which is an abysmal endeavour when examining something that is *per definitionem* 'in between'. On the other hand, in order to justify its existence, media anthropology tends to treat the presence of 'the media' as being absolute and positive in nature, which complicates the perception and analysis both of their real and theoretical absence and of their problematic implications. Both these tendencies prevent us from evaluating how media, in their growing ubiquity, are indeed changing 'our Other' as an object of research as much as 'our Selves'. They thus hinder a more integrated and critical debate about the methodological and theoretical challenges before anthropological work as a whole in a 'media-saturated world' (Ortner, 2006: 80), beyond the assigned (and accepted) sub-territory of media anthropology.

In what follows I exemplify how event and debate, as prime markers of the momentary and the ephemeral in the production of mass-mediated reality, have shaped my basic approach to fieldwork in the media and TV production landscapes of India and Turkey as well as my later research practice and analysis. I propose that we need to deal with a trajectory from 'what they are' ('matrilineal') via 'what they do' (practise polygamy, watch and produce TV, use mobile phones) and 'what they show' (rituals, demonstrations, imagery) towards 'what they think and

what they say' (about a fleeting issue or event). This shift is neither teleological nor are its components mutually exclusive, of course. But it inherently means a closer integration of the 'I' and the 'they' at the time of fieldwork as well as of information and opinion across space, and thus a tilting from observation to participation. Under the circumstances, the 'ethnographic present', as a figure of thought and perception, becomes not merely objectionable under human(istic) and disciplinary considerations, but it is also rendered practically inconceivable. What becomes enhanced is not only the requirement to be conscious regarding the use of tense in writing. The prominence of debate and event in the media, rather than permanent structures and representative practices, also imply the realization that ethnographers always conduct fieldwork at a particular, and ephemeral, moment in time of the ongoing history of the place they are in and of their own lives. I call this 'the ethnographic moment'. Taking up John Postill's recent call for a greater consideration of history in media anthropological research, I will discuss this moment as an opportunity to transcend the stigma of deficiency and lack of depth that is readily associated with the ruptured and the fugacious that media signify, and to question a one-sided presence of media and of speed.

## Mediated Content and Anthropological Representation

As those who have been studying mass media long before anthropologists know, related technologies are subject to ongoing change. Their productions and especially their mediated information have always been ephemeral, bound to the moment: nothing is as old as yesterday's newspaper. In his deliberations about the 'flow' of television, Raymond Williams could not but refer to then current programme examples from US channels in order to support his argument of television as 'a new social form' (2003 [1974]: 11). His work is thus probably among the very first that did not shy away from becoming located at an exact date in time – which is what has made his findings enduring and seminal. The risk of reduced representative value, on the other hand, indicates why media anthropology had such a late and difficult start and why it was, and partly remains, characterized by its instinctive avoidance or limitation of content analysis (Bird, 2010: 4–11).

This tendency became evident when I began thinking about my comparative PhD research on television production in India and Turkey in the context of commercialization, transnationalization and neo-nationalism at the turn of the millennium. Looking for some methodological examples among the scarce media ethnographies that were available then, I realized that the consideration of a larger relevant societal discourse, let alone a current debate, had hardly been part of the research design.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the ephemeral nature of the respective medium's content was circumvented as much as possible. This circumvention became possible through a near-exclusive focus on audiences. Medium, content and producer were thought as one entity and set apart from viewers/listeners who thus became 'observable' in their reactions to them. The audience focus was mainly on 'what they were' (Indian, Malay, Hindu, Muslim, Inuit, Iban, middle class, slum dweller, etc.) and 'what they did' (watch television, listen to radio). 'What they said' played a role only in terms of their sense-making processes, that is, what they made of what was being broadcast and how the respective medium/technology was being accommodated and put to use in daily life. 'What they showed', that is, in this case what the audiences consumed, largely referred to programming which was not necessarily on air

during the time of the fieldwork and to fiction productions such as TV serials, which could be perceived as somewhat permanent in terms of potential long-term broadcasting. News, information production and journalism, that is anything that was directly challenging the categories of culture and representation, were firmly outside this 'anthropological lens'.

It had then only been a few years previously that James F. Weiner and Faye Ginsburg had confronted each other over the issue of 'televisualist anthropology' in *Current Anthropology*. In the ethnographic study of modern media, Weiner could detect no more than an 'ersatz [i.e. not original or 'real'] anthropology'. He was quite explicit about wanting to preserve not so much the rights of indigenous peoples as 'the anthropological perspective on non-Western ritual, art and representation that was bequeathed to us by Victor Turner' (Weiner and Ginsburg, 1997: 197). In Weiner's view, content worth looking at could only be what was defining of the natives in terms of their essential, unchanging expression (ritual, art and representation). By definition of its volatile character, anything mass- or electronically mediated could not be indigenous – which Ginsburg sharply contested. Fifteen years after Fabian, Weiner was thus in the very face of the global 'media revolution' – signified not least by anthropological reports increasingly being written with computer software already developed in India – ruling out any potential coevalness between anthropologist and interlocutor and insisted on a control of the field through classic methodology. While modern politics, economics and law were increasingly becoming central subjects of anthropology, it was certainly not coincidental that he linked modern mass media and their immanent power of disruptive representation with a call for the uncompromising centring of the indigenous, or, as John Comaroff has called it, 'brute localism' (2010: 533).

Weiner's position was thus certainly not representative of all anthropology. However, it was only contested by emerging media anthropologists themselves, which kept the opposition somewhat unassertive and led to an observable compromise: one group tried to maintain the focus on the indigenous/the local and another maintained the methodology and basic approach. The first path-breaking compilation of media ethnographies, published as late as 2002 and co-edited by Ginsburg, was even in the title ostentatiously locating 'anthropology on new terrain' (Ginsburg et al., 2002). It laid strong emphasis on indigenous media use, thereby vindicating the inclusion of content production. Opposing Weiner in terms of media itself, the technological Other was here positively appropriated for the employment and assertion of the changing local, thus becoming a proof of a possible progressive media ethnography that still centred the indigenous in broader terms. In the second group fell the above-mentioned early and partly still prevalent ethnographic approaches to corporate and commercially produced mass media, and particularly to television, which immanently defied the Weinerian position through their very research focus. However, they readily transferred the concept of the native onto non-western city dwellers and middle-class families, confirming them in a permanent position of receiving modernity. This carried a blissful ignorance of television's operation in many postcolonial and/or non-western countries since the 1950s. Significantly, little attention was paid to 'real' indigenous peoples' encounter with commercial media logics in terms of their successive exclusion from contents and disenfranchisement in new hierarchical structures. Rather, the urban Other was nativized and looked at – in a somewhat reifying way, as in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*<sup>3</sup> – in terms of 'their' made-observable reaction to what immanently became foreign, manipulative and (excitingly) new to their identity through its varying, disruptive nature: the medium itself, its contents and the contents' producers.

Both these emerging approaches – the media-empowered indigenous and the nativized urban consumer – tended to adapt the field to anthropology rather than the other way round. Both thus neutralized critique of anthropological conventions as much as of the media. At the time, it was certainly difficult to establish where my fieldwork in the TV landscapes of India and Turkey fitted these approaches as it was carried out in the mode of an ‘anthropology of the contemporary’ (Rabinow, 2007) and interested in professional producers’ roles and scope of decision-making post-1990 liberalization policies.

When I started the research, I was faced with a scenario impossible to ignore: in both countries, there was a virtual explosion of advertising that ‘framed’ franchised transnational formats, such as the much-hyped *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, which set the stage for a successive flood of globally identical game-, reality- and casting shows, and plush locally produced serials and soap operas. Above all, 24×7 news channels, along with talk and debate shows, were starting to dominate and structure TV consumption in growing parts of the population. In anticipation of the soon to evolve ‘breaking news’-culture, ‘infotainment’ was one of the neologisms then. Street-interviews by on-location reporters were becoming the norm, and the first call-in programmes, with mobile phones quickly proliferating beyond urban centres, were on air. Newspapers started the self-referential mode of reporting on other daily media, particularly TV, in a big way (Ellis, 2004; Luhmann, 2000). Their emerging websites were beginning to burgeon with, themselves highly ephemeral, user commentaries that were often more telling than the respective article itself, something that has become ever more palpable with the growth of social media networks in later years of my research.

Obviously, things were happening on screen, and in front of it, in an increasingly intense and participatory manner, which was both event- and debate-driven and -driving. With commercialization, emerging digitalization and increasing convergence of media, ‘the field’ was visibly beginning to permanently elude its demarcation and representation through the integration of audiences and producers with constantly changing contents, that is, through what was being talked about at a particular point or period in time. There was no way of conducting meaningful research on television if I was not actually reversing the pattern I had met with in earlier media ethnographies. I had to start from the fleeting content at the very time of my fieldwork before I could even think of approaching informants. In my case, they were foremost those professionally producing what we (all) were ‘there’ increasingly consuming and discussing on a daily basis: journalists, heads of programming, commissioning and executive producers, serial writers and others.

In this context, the fact that producers are less separable from media contents than those who (are meant to) receive them acquired an anthropological meaning, rather than merely being assumed so as to ensure ethnographic operationability. In contrast to audiences, who have other work and professions, professional producers, particularly in the traditional media of cinema, press and television,<sup>4</sup> inevitably have to be approached first not for who they are or what they do but for what they do for a living, and often for acquiring or maintaining a social status in a now highly capitalized context. My personal contact and dialogue had to start with the ongoing programming as much as with the consideration that the same producer might not work for the same channel, and maybe not even for the same medium or the same business, when I came back the next year. It made no sense trying to speak to them, and to hope that they would speak to me, if I did not know what they were speaking about at the moment – a government

decision, a social movement, a fiscal disaster, a criminal investigation, a military operation, a court judgment, a show or serial in preparation, flopping or succeeding with audiences, the attempt on the part of a competing enterprise to take over the channel or acute censorship regulations – and what consequently also quickly became what *I* was talking about.

## Event, Rupture and the Witnessing Anthropologist

As my interest had been to follow respective societal discourses and their production through the media in the first place, I had been somewhat prepared to consider ongoing debates. What I had not taken account of was the potential disruptive or rather inadvertently *constructive* power, in terms of my research design, of what can completely dominate debate for an instantly incalculable period, namely the event.

In both my countries of research I was very early on confronted with two extreme events that were excessively mediated, albeit on different circuits (one globally and one mainly nationally). During the first month of my first stay in Turkey in 2001, 9/11 happened, which made the new primacy of debate anyway unmistakable. It was the first event that was in this intensity characterized by the circulation of identical images (of the collapsing World Trade Center towers) for weeks on end through TV stations around the globe, while it was how they were commented and talked about, on and off screen and on a day-to-day basis, which evinced new analogies and differences. In the case of Turkey, night-long debate shows on the dominant secular commercial channels were fiercely discussing the obvious 'Islamist danger' that was about to subjugate the republic in the shape of the just founded, and soon to be governing, Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP, Justice and Development Party) and recommended the country as a spearhead in the beginning 'war on terror'. Programme-makers and audiences of smaller Islamic channels, on the other hand, were busy arguing how terror and violence were inconsistent with Islam, fearing, in the wake of the upcoming elections, a backlash in relation to the limited public freedoms they had managed to achieve.

Only six months later, in a global atmosphere marked by the growing legitimacy of open Islamophobia, I began my first comparative stay in India in Bombay in late February 2002. It took off with images flickering 24x7 over the TV screens of the anti-Muslim pogrom in the bordering federal state of Gujarat, which was, and continues to be, governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party). More than 2000 Muslims were killed within two months (the real figure being probably even higher), and more than 200,000 were largely permanently displaced.

In contrast to Turkey, here it was the secular news channels, and their producers, that had an increasingly hard time if they wanted to retain and increase advertising revenues. Speaking of the state-sponsored pogrom-character of the event meant going against not only Hindu nationalist leaders and politicians, who for their part advocated for India as a 'natural' ally of the US in the 'war on terror'. It also meant going against audiences, who, in anticipation of what would soon become known as a 'shitstorm', accused such reporting of being 'exaggerated' and 'sensationalist', and 'anti-Hindu', 'pro-terrorist' and 'anti-Gujarat'. Muslims fell increasingly silent in order not to be accused of further 'provocation'.<sup>5</sup> The acute shock was thus not merely about the event. Rather, the absence of shock among audiences showed their

newly acquired power as consumers to influence and reject media content they considered to be 'offending' and 'misrepresenting Hindu culture' in the pursuit or support of anti-minority nationalist politics (Sontag, 2004).

Moreover, the violence was openly visible and not censored even in its being live- broadcast 24x7 over weeks. Different parties took that as a confirmation of India's status as a functioning democracy that could and should handle an event like this on its own. Witnessing appeared unnecessary and, in total contrast to 9/11, the international media hardly reported on the pogrom, let alone on its background and aftermath. It is not without irony that the situation somewhat reversed the apt formulation by Liisa Malkki: 'the journalists arrive just as the anthropologist is leaving' (1997: 93). Anthropologists have traditionally looked down upon the event- driven journalist, insinuating that his or her knowledge of the place and its people is – and remains – superficial. Malkki's critique was an early reminder that no matter how much 'transition', 'change' and 'flow' have become part of her vocabulary, the anthropologist is traditionally ill-equipped to deal with rupture: the moment a field seriously begins to elude representation, it is abandoned.

In the case of Gujarat, however, the critical local journalist was somewhat paralysed and the global journalist did not show up in the first place. By contrast, many anthropologists, whether working on media-related subjects or not, whether on location in Gujarat or in some far-away area, were already in the country, and stayed there, and now had to decide if and how far they had to take this pivotal event, which they had involuntarily witnessed, into account – not merely because everybody who had found a screen to watch, a radio to listen to, a paper to read, a computer to access or a telephone to use knew about it and was talking about it in one way or another, but also because they were *not* talking about it (Ohm, 2007).

## Event and Debate as Markers of the Moment of Participation

Both 9/11 and the Gujarat pogrom prompted the realization that I was, inescapably, in each respective place 'just when Y happened' and 'at the time of the Z debate', and that the control that the ethnographer is still assumed to have over her field was very much turning out to be an illusion of accustomed power (see Das, 1985). Sally Falk Moore stated as early as 1987 that 'in the past 25 years there has been a shift in attention from structure to event' (1987: 729), that is, anthropologists have increasingly tended to organize their fieldwork around a particular scheduled happening such as a festivity, a ritual, a gathering, a rally or an election.

In this case, however, the respective events were not scheduled and had not been anticipated within the then current flow of debate. They had also not been 'media events' in the way that Couldry et al. (2010), building on earlier work by Dayan and Katz (1992), refer to them, namely a pre-scripted 'genre of media communication' (2010: 2). They had in an eruptive, non-foreseeable form become part of my momentary 'lived world' (Comaroff, 2010: 530), which thus immanently grew in scope through the mass media and their 'symbiotic relationship with terror events' (Katz and Liebes, 2010: 36).

This bespeaks the degree to which we who are conducting fieldwork in today's 'media-saturated world' – which need not be media ethnography – are exposed to, have to deal with and find it difficult to ignore media-generated information on unforeseeable events that may have little or

nothing to do with our original research question. The events need not necessarily be as pivotal as these two. Corporate media has come to frame even the least controversial or most banal issues in terms of a usually quick succession of sometimes highly dramatized 'debates'. The likelihood, however, of being confronted with the repercussions of so-called 'low-intensity conflicts' which have followed the world wars – with bomb attacks, persecution of minorities and violence against disadvantaged sections of society, social uprisings, political earthquakes and natural disasters that constitute major threads in the fabric of globalization – has clearly increased over the past two decades. It is information we have not and cannot have sought and which we receive at the same time, and through the same technological means (TV, press, radio, internet, mobile phone), as do our informants, even if they are media producers themselves, which creates a form of inherent, unconscious coevalness.

At the same time, the centrality of mediated event and debate implies a significant shift away from what has been ethnography's fundamental mode of operation, namely observation, or, as Fabian has critically put it, 'visualism', that is, the presentation of 'its object primarily as seen' (2002 [1983]: 151). Neither 9/11 nor the violence in Gujarat were observable for me because they did not happen in the place where I stayed. Like those I was with, I received news of them by way of their media-framed repercussions that were, particularly through TV, visual and relatively direct – 'live' – because of the momentary significance and the national immediacy. But they shifted my own practice, at least initially, from observing to watching and consuming.

What thus remained were the reactions to the event and the erupting debate, which elude the task of observation. Debate may be formally observable in terms of its speaking participants and how it is conducted and, now, its conveyance through visual media (including smart phone and computer screen).<sup>6</sup> But one does not observe a debate, one follows or one takes part in it, both of which underscore its ongoing, dynamic character. Debate is, particularly in terms of its temporality, not quite the same either as discourse or as meaning-making (Bal, 1994). Its new prominence signifies that what people think and say in mass-mediated contexts no longer only refers to group identities and collective practices but describes personal experiences and assessments that have already been informed by change and are themselves subject to change. The temporal distance between the 'I' and the 'they', not only at the time of fieldwork but across space, thus becomes minimized, which prioritizes participation over observation. Consequently, it also makes the forming and establishing of a contestable viewpoint by the ethnographer on the matter of debate less avoidable.

After 9/11, but especially in the course of the Gujarat violence, I found myself in conversations, not only with direct informants but also with everyday media users who turned out to take a position that forced me to make it clear where I stood, sometimes at the cost of retrieving information that I might have obtained had I feigned neutrality or even sympathy. The building and especially the revelation of their own – itself changeable – position poses a new challenge to ethnographers, whose implications have to be weighed carefully, yet often very quickly. They become immanent precisely because, in the face of an acute situation, most of these interlocutors show their own individual opinion only during the coeval communication. Participant following of a debate itself thus signifies the involvement of the ethnographer in a situation and an exposure to the unpredictable. It differs significantly from participant observation – always a contradiction in terms (Bourdieu, 2003) – in a pre-chosen and demarcated setting, such as a Hindu nationalist organization, for instance, where we know



beforehand what to expect, can build a mental distance between ourselves and our 'object of study' and prepare to hold back our personal views so as to extract representative material. Thomas Blom Hansen has shown how difficult it became for him to continue this 'act' vis-a-vis Hindutva activists, thus also criticizing a still lingering requirement of 'neutrality in the field' (2001: 16).

Inasmuch as participation overrode observation the unaccounted for events and debates, the ruptures and dominant discussions, thus also underlined the accidental and exchangeable character of my own presence at a historical moment in time and space. At the time of the uncontested 'ethnographic present', the ethnographer thought of her (usually it was a 'his' then) own presence as exchangeable in terms of a field and observable culture that was considered to be more or less the same whenever he arrived. By contrast, event and debate made me realize that if I had come at any other time, even a month earlier or later, I would have found a different field and gathered, and been confronted with, different information, which would have given my work a different shape. This brings into view that fieldwork itself is always not only temporary but temporal. Ethnography depends in its practice and practicability on numerous factors that structure the life, hopes, plans, expectations, perception, thoughts and, particularly, the presence and absence of the anthropologist in places: acceptance of applications, release of funds, university obligations, coordination with colleagues, consideration of and planning with family and loved ones, visa restrictions, climate considerations, etc.

Whereas our final arrival in the field is often made to appear, especially in the very applications for funding, as part of a research design over which we have full command, it is in actual fact, especially if we go to places outside our country, already the result of a number of coincidences, negotiations and debates that lands us in the place of ethnography at a completely accidental moment in ongoing time.

## **Breaking through the Breadth: History, the Momentary and Dimensions of Time**

This constancy of the unforeseeable, the ephemeral and the accidental, which becomes, as I propose, undeniable with (the acknowledgement of) media-related research, holds some fundamental methodological and also theoretical implications, not only for media anthropology but for anthropology as a whole, and even beyond. The decade that has passed since I first took up my PhD fieldwork and was faced with the currency of events and debates may well be called the decade of the 'emerging subfield' of media anthropology as it has yielded an unprecedented number of studies that can be put, or have been forced, into that bracket. Among them are many that have greatly advanced the subject of media in ethnographic research (Abu-Lughod, 2004; Boellstorff, 2008; Brosius, 2005; Hirschkind, 2006; Mankekar, 1999; Mazzarella, 2003; Meyer and Moors, 2006; Postill, 2011; Rao, 2010; Schulz, 2012). Overall, though, there is still a prevailing difficulty in moving beyond approaching the field in the pattern of either the media-empowered indigenous or the nativized urban consumer/user that I elaborated above. This difficulty relates to the fact that, even though the vocabulary of change and transformation is omnipresent, the underlying question of time and representation itself has been left remarkably untouched. A recent advance by John Postill has been the rather lone thrust in that direction. What he does, though, is direct the perspective from the present to the past.

Interrogating the concept of social change itself, Postill basically argues for media anthropology to set a stronger focus on history. In pointing out, with Tim Ingold, that 'media ethnography is not media anthropology' (Postill, 2009: 335), he identifies a thinking and writing in the 'ethnographic present *continuous*' in many studies (2012: 5; italics in the original). In his view, ethnographic research into media is precisely limiting itself too much to the contemporary and the 'ongoing' in different parts of the world, 'in a struggle', as he rightly suspects, 'to 'keep up' with the seemingly relentless pace of socio-technical change in a competitive academic marketplace' (2012: 5). He thus suspects the reincarnation of the a-historical 'ethnographic present' in a new avatar. This time round, the Other is not 'frozen' in their dynamics in order to secure their timeless representation but is ignored in their larger temporal, genealogical framework by ethnographers too busy accounting for all the change at their time of research. Postill introduces a distinction between 'social changing' as a dominant dimension in the concept of current research and 'actual change' as a dimension that is lacking (2012: 4-5), and suggests 'that we should add historical depth to the geographical breadth of media anthropology' (2009: 335).

The importance of Postill's thrust is threefold, I think. It helps us realize that media ethnographies based on the present run the danger of becoming a mere accumulation of momentary, not-so-thick descriptions from different places that do away with the question of tense by being outdated themselves in no time. Closely related is what Postill and Ingold mean by the difference between media ethnography and media anthropology, namely the imbalance between the number of short-term descriptive and interpretive works and theoretical advances, the latter of which Ortner (2006: 81) has rightly criticized as generally having become too compartmentalized into literature studies and philosophy. Moreover, Postill's critique illustrates that the sudden increase of media ethnographies over the past 15 years and their overwhelming contemporary focus does little to counteract precisely the impression that modern media in the non-western world have been overall a very recent appearance, before which there reigned some pre-technological, and anthropologically safe, age. Particularly his emphasis on diachronic research, historic (dis-)continuities and the uneven spread of different media at the same historical time is thus crucial.

However, in the light of what I have described above, Postill's proposal also invites critique on three accounts. To begin with, his demand to focus on 'actual' change harbours the presumption that the momentary is deficient, not quite enough, too shallow, to make us understand 'in depth'. In it lurks anthropology's old claim of holism (and its habitual dissociation from journalism) and hence the notion that the anthropologist's knowing command and control over herself, her research question, her field, her informants and over time itself needs to be restored. Maybe not quite calculable before and during fieldwork, interlocutors become in Postill's proposal understandable not so much by going on in time *with them* but back *through them*, by historicizing their practices, and *to them*, by 'multi-timed ethnography', that is, the repeated visit to the field that is intended to deepen knowledge of rather than *in* time. While these suggestions are doubtless useful, they seem to be led by the impulse to overcome the ephemeral through the determination of the finite ('A changed into B'; 2012: 5).

It is significant in this regard that Postill refers merely to a 'geographical' rather than a topical and contextual breadth in many studies. Indeed, we not only find works from a growing number of countries around the globe – it also seems that the ever more common 'multi-sited

ethnography' (Marcus, 1995) speaks of a felt need to cover and do justice to all aspects involved in media-related research, aspects which are potentially *infinite* due to the 'in-between' character of media, as well as the increasing difficulty of doing so. In giving priority to ensuring a 'serious' approach to media and social change, however, Postill appears merely to add 'history' to the mounting number of aspects inherent in the media. He inadvertently increases the burden of contexts to consider rather than easing it by subordinating the pressing question of methodology to the objective of media anthropology catching up with conventional anthropological standards. Somewhat apologetically he points out that 'historicising ethnographic research and writing [...] is a long-established anthropological practice', but has not yet reached 'maturity' in media anthropology 'because of its relative youth' (Postill, 2012: 7).

The question arises, though, why the blessing of anthropology 'proper', which has so far kept media anthropology at arm's length, should (still) take such clear priority over challenging some of its enduring, or rather reinforced, assumptions that are obviously difficult to maintain for (all) ethnography in a 'media-saturated world'. The idea of strengthening the historical in order to tame the fugitive, in fact, foregoes temporality as a way to break through the infinite breadth of media-related aspects – namely by overcoming anthropology's classical reservation vis-a-vis uncontrolled time.

Safeguarding instead, metaphorically speaking, the lid on the container of anthropology, Postill instinctively follows the 'anthropological impulse' in the face of uncontrollable change and rupture: he stops and looks back so as to ensure some order and capacity of representation. As much as this leaves unquestioned the hegemony of anthropology 'proper', including its prime focus on practice and structure, it reifies the hegemony of literal, measurable time. Thus subjected to the forces he wishes to tackle, Postill's approach provides little assistance in dealing with the fact that time continues to move on for both ethnographer and interlocutors. It also remains closed to other dimensions of time. Consistent with his focus on 'actual' change, Postill explicitly rejects 'the anthropological tendency to romanticize "non- Western" time and exoticize "cyber" time' and argues that we should 'at long last come to terms with the universality of modern clock- and calendar time' (2012: 8).

There are dimensions to time, though, that are not defined culturally or by media and that become universal, that is, *anthropological*, precisely because they inherently upset the hegemony of measured time. One of them is felt time, for instance in terms of a gap between expectation and result. It was a very common statement among my interlocutors in Turkey that 'nothing is really changing', even though 'actually' the speed with which change occurred under the AKP government in the media landscape, in economics, politics and society, was remarkable compared to earlier decades. The widespread feeling that 'everything stays the same' alluded to a perceived discord between the overall quantity of change and the quality of change in terms of particular expectations – more democracy, more Islam, more socialism, more Kemalism, more minority rights, etc., respectively – which in time directed my research toward a stronger consideration of the ways in which this government was reproducing patterns of the regime it had promised to change so as to organize a long suppressed and now acutely assertive pluralism of demands.

The other dimension of time concerns its relationship with truth. As indicated, an event of severe

non-acknowledged injustice, such as the televised Gujarat pogrom, can have a profound effect on both ethnographer and her ethnography if she allows it to take centre stage. This is not least because it invariably makes time stand still for the victims, for the simple reason that truth, in contrast to mediated reality, is not subject to time (as otherwise we would know no judiciary; see Badiou, 2006 [1988]). For victims, the moment in which they were turned from ordinary people into victims tends to last at least until some justice is experienced. A (media-) anthropological critique of speed, and hence the possibility of both acknowledging and transcending the momentary, becomes thus immanent to the victims' difficulty in, or resistance to 'moving on'.

When taking temporal, non-practical dimensions such as these into account, the speed of media-driven change and measurable time lose their absolute character, becoming not only relative references but also issues of affirmation or critique of hegemony and (de)legitimization, power and (in)justice, the discussion of which is so far strikingly absent from a media anthropology too bent on justifying its own 'sub'-field.

## Following the Moment in Time

My point here is thus obviously not to suggest that (media-)ethnographers should let go of research questions and simply jump into matters, or to deny that history and genealogy deserve far more attention than they currently get. On the contrary, as I already indicated, anthropology's disregard for the diverse history of modern mass media to some extent accounts for media anthropology's very own temporal subordination. My point is to make the field the priority over the (real and imagined) conventions of anthropology in a situation where its methodological and theoretical provisions have been turned into disciplinarian qualifications rather than providing sufficient support for meeting the requirements of the 'lived' and 'media-saturated world'. Acknowledging enhanced volatility and the likelihood of being confronted with the unforeseen, the speed of technological change and the prominence of ongoing debate – that is, 'seizing the moment' and being attentive to its various temporal dimensions – can allow, precisely by giving away rather than ensuring control, the field and our interlocutors to teach us methodology. This can take very different forms, many of which we have not even begun to approach, while others have their own marginalized history.

In my case, the respective events I witnessed in India and Turkey made me organize my repeated returns to both countries not in terms of the conventional interrogation of 'how the present has been produced' but in terms of Moore's 1987 question 'What is the present producing?' (Moore in Malkki, 1997: 86). Turning the television on when reaching the field or watching, if available, some live stream beforehand and learning what is currently being discussed and how, has become, or rather remained, the moment when the actual fieldwork process begins. This means to acknowledge each time a new starting point, whose seizing admits to its arbitrariness in time and hence to its limited representativeness. Over time, what people talk about – and what they do not talk about – 'this time' relates ever more to previous debates, enabling the selection of key aspects. New events lose their power to completely upset the evolving 'topical timeline(s)' because, depending on their gravity, they can be assessed more easily and even ignored, while they may also give a new turn to my work. Follow-up fieldwork in this sense means to follow an unplanned and non-projectable process, which begins and ends at moments we cannot pre-determine and is hence able to accommodate, and to examine closely, the permanence of

change. This does not mean that it becomes a-historical, though.

Proceeding 'from ethnographic moment to ethnographic moment', I have been able, accidentally starting in 2001, to trace a development among my main interlocutors in both India and Turkey through the decade that overall described, in different ways and for different reasons, a process of disempowerment and disenchantment. This very much meets Postill's demand for a determinable, representable 'A changes into B': often sanguine, if not enthusiastic TV producers and journalists changed into troubled and frustrated TV producers and journalists. It is not only going back in time that allows for a grasp of history. The further we go with time, following event and debate, the more we understand of where we started from. The problem thus appears to be not the momentary experience in the field but, indeed, the momentary enforced by an 'academic marketplace' that increasingly expects both fieldwork and publication to take place at 2–3-year intervals.

Advancing in this manner, by contrast, entails an understanding and acceptance of the research process as an interrupted one. It does not try to fill the blanks of the absences from the field, at least not exhaustively, and hence confirms, through the very presence of media, an anthropological *a priori*, namely that it makes all the difference that we have been 'there'. Media-generated 'time-space compression' (Harvey, 1990) and the accessibility of continuously growing online archives and footprints can, as Postill also points out (2009, 335), increasingly cover our physical absences and suggest a permanence of presence and thus of holism. Yet, as the events described above underline, it thus matters even more at what time we start our research in a real location and what we actually perceive during that limited, accidental time, because it is local immediacy that generates some resilience against being swept away by the next media debate. However much media are not only constituted 'in between', connecting ever more spheres of life, but also allude to immediacy themselves (Eisenlohr, 2011), they can greatly support but not completely outwit our senses, as in that case they would *become* our senses and forfeit their name. Unless we pursue cyber anthropology right away, the moment we non-virtually experience with people and in the atmosphere of a local context, even if we do not always 'observe', 'see' or discuss in the direct mode, inevitably leaves a different, more immediate impression on us, confronting us with a certain event and/or debate in the first place.

For example, the question was not *if* we (all) experienced 9/11, but *where* we experienced it. In my case, being in Turkey created a formative significance that I followed during three further coincidental moments of event and debate: the first election victory of the AKP in 2002, the unearthing of the secular-nationalist Ergenekon network<sup>7</sup> in 2009, and the ongoing detentions of dissidents (including journalists) through the meanwhile twice re-elected AKP-government in 2012. Consequently, I might not come up with a fundamentally different analysis but have very different material to rely on that will feed different emphases and conclusions, than had I accidentally returned in 2004 and 2007 (and Postill is indeed very right to demand that we should date our research (2012: 7)). While fieldwork thus becomes accidental in ongoing time, it remains dependent on physical presence, which goes to show that the ethnographic moment, in contrast to the ethnographic present, is a matter not of invention but of acknowledgement: the 'field', however virtually enlarged, becomes accentuated in what it always was, namely comparable in time to itself.

At a time, moreover, that liberalization of both academia and media has been largely

swallowed by neoliberalism, the witnessing role of the 'on-location' anthropologist, alongside and even as a substitute for the (detained/ silenced/corrupted) journalist, acquires a new significance (see Hasty, 2010; Jasani, 2009). Finally, ethnography opens itself to chronological gaps that can, and should, be filled by others. Giving away control thus concerns not merely the field and interlocutors, but also our fellow researchers, with whom we then not merely compete in terms of approaches and analysis, but whose equally time-dependent work we complement with the periods that we can talk about more profoundly and vice versa. We admit to sharing the load of temporal representation, which we, like historians, were anyway never able to shoulder alone.

## The Thinkable Absence of Media

Because of its own infrequent interruptions, processual follow-up fieldwork can also become more aware of the fragmentation of information circuits in terms of choice or access as well as of what, and who, remains outside these circuits in the first place. It can thus acknowledge the significance of the absent and the missing precisely in the face of a seemingly unparalleled ready availability of direct information. In particular, it is able to explore under what circumstances and with what respective motivations certain events and readings of them are kept in the debate while others are *made* ephemeral.

In the case of Turkey, for instance, 9/11 was not a big topic in the headlines a year later, 2002, when the AKP was first elected to power, which indicated that Islamophobia, in its particular Turkish variant, had not substantially flourished. In India, by comparison, the Gujarat violence was equally out of the headlines when I first returned 2003, which suggested that the majoritarian reaction of lacking shock, sadness and condemnation, translating into ratings and advertising revenue, had successfully complemented international aloofness, keeping the event out of further debate and thus from being acknowledged as a crime. In such a situation, the moment of the event cannot but become the starting point of an ethnography of the absent, guided by a reaction that should have been and a debate that should be, which will make historical research anyway an inherent necessity.

However, the trope of the absent and the missing that I have evoked throughout this article goes further than missing information and debate, absences from the field and conflicting dimensions of time. It also concerns the thinking in terms of an absence of the media itself. This aspect, I propose in conclusion, is pivotal for the realistic development of a media anthropology that has become more biased by its particular object, the media, than any other anthropological research field and even any other academic discipline. While objects in other research areas may turn out to be problematic, or even not as relevant as initially assumed, to allow as a media anthropologist a critical view of the media, or even come to the conclusion that their importance has been overestimated, has become tantamount to admitting that there is no need for a media anthropology in the first place. The result is a, in itself disqualifying and empirically decreasingly justifiable, compulsion to continuously prove not only the significance of the media but also their empowering novelty and to eagerly subsume under media anthropology any anthropologist who touches upon media in her work.

This compulsion, however, cannot solely be attributed to larger anthropology's ancestral

reservations towards the media and their permanently changing contents, and the consequential hierarchical organization of the discipline into the few half-castes for whom media are ever-present and its 'real' representatives for whom they are basically absent. In this context of academic hierarchization, the distinction between exceptional presence and general absence obviously amounts to little less than a lie, which unveils the fear that the speed of change that media symbolize and generate may herald the end of ethnography as a medium and the redundancy of the representing ethnographer. It is a thoroughly artificial distinction that helps to disable an open critical discourse in the discipline by obscuring the fact that media and their contents do, *of course*, diffuse into all areas of anthropology, starting with the various media employed during research and writing.

What is important to realize, though, is that this unproductive and anti-empirical disciplinary organization is a strategic distortion of a simple fact, namely that human life without media, particularly as far as modern mass media are concerned, is, *of course*, thinkable, in contrast to human life without society, economics or representation. Here, it is helpful to return to Johannes Fabian who, in defence of his theory of coevalness, militated against the 'primitive assumption' that there is 'a difference, and a distance, between thing and image, reality and representation' (2002 [1983], 160). He argued that 'man [and woman, one feels compelled to add; B.O.] does not "need" language; man, in the dialectical, transitive understanding of *to be*, is language (much like he does not need food, shelter, and so on, but *is* his food and his house)' (2002 [1983]: 162), which is why 'man is communication and society' (2002 [1983]: 160, italics in the original).

Modern mass media, however, are 'needed'. They are human-made possible means of representation and communication but not identical with them. However much media technologies are today – even through their absence – generative of what and how we perceive, know and think, even do and act, they are not essential for our consciousness and self-awareness as humans. It is because we can think something as absent that critiquing it becomes comprehensible: a critique of 'food' or 'communication' *as such*, by contrast, makes as little sense as a critique of the human being herself.

Statements that societies have 'irrevocably' become medialized – that is, completely diffused by media, and that a world without media has become 'unthinkable' – which can be heard at every other conference and read in every other paper, are thus not coincidentally generally formulated as a justifying outset and not a satisfying conclusion. They cannot but represent a claim rather than an empirical finding. As such, they resonate with Marshall McLuhan's (1964) concept of 'media as the extension of man', inadvertently aligning 1960s techno-centric enthusiasm with regard to the possible with neoliberalism's ideology of the inevitable, the 'no alternative'-doctrine. Inscribed in this reactive absolutism is, logically and literally, an indifference, that is, the forfeiting of distinction and the very possibility of critique, which has haunted media anthropology ever since the media-empowered indigenous and the nativized media consumer were constructed.

## Conclusion

To approach media not only in terms of their obvious ubiquity but also in terms of their thinkable

and empirical absence could greatly support opening media anthropology towards critical introspection and reflection, and a more balanced and empirically sound contemporary ethnographic approach. In turn, the same realization could enable larger anthropology to consider media, and the momentary events and debates they circulate and generate, as a more integrative part of its research beyond the occasional 'role of the media' chapter. There can be no compulsion to consider media, just as there can be no norm of ignoring them. Likewise, there will always be those scholars who have greater media expertise than others – whose field may be economics, politics, religion, law, art, psychology, etc. – that is, precisely all the areas that are media-related. An open, integrated and processual approach towards both presence and absence, content and form of media may allow an ethnography to start without an explicit focus on media but end up finding they have a key role to play, just as an initially media-centred ethnography may be led, through a mediated event and debate, to ultimately set its priorities elsewhere.

Standing in a hierarchical mode opposing each other not only complicates a more prolific, theory-oriented debate within and beyond anthropology. It is also counterproductive for the development of a discipline that, as a whole, struggles like no other with frequent predictions of its own redundancy (Comaroff, 2010; Jebens and Kohl, 2011), not least because (media) ethnography becomes ever more popular in related disciplines such as sociology, political science and religious, cultural and media studies. It blinds both sides to changing facets of empirical reality, one of them being, for instance, the currently observable shift from the primacy of access to media towards the avoidance or rejection not only of particular media contents but also whole media institutions and technology for their corporate and political organization and *enforced ubiquity* – which translates the thinkable absence of media into practice (Rosenthal and Ribak, forthcoming).

Mediated event and debate represent in this very context a pivotal empirical development, which is likely to confront any researcher in one way or another, and which gives rise to new forms of theoretical reflection and methodology. Allowing them into research, as I have tried to show in this article, has to do with acknowledging what is, and always was, more than introducing something new. While it entails a retraction of the ethnographer's control and a greater, coeval, vulnerability towards the unknown, it provides a way of productively and responsibly dealing with what has been both anthropology's basic constituent and its greatest fear: the accidental moment of its practice and its own redundancy through its objects' self-representation.

## NOTES

1.

The Writing Culture debate essentially came to understand the writing of ethnography as a process not of representing but of constructing culture(s). Its most important publication is *Writing Culture: The Politics and Poetics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986).

2.

An exception is Purnima Mankekar's book *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: Television, Womanhood and Nation in Modern India* (1999), which is – not by coincidence – a classic today. It provides an ethnography that very much followed, even though only partly through the then current TV programming, the ongoing debates in the field and thus has been a critical (in both sense of the word) contribution towards understanding the logics in the normalization of a Hindu-nationalist discourse among India's upwardly mobile middle classes.



3.

*Nanook of the North* (1922) is a silent film by Robert Flaherty, shot among the Inuit in Arctic Canada. It counts as the first feature-length documentary but its ethnographic value has been doubted because it is more or less staged. In a key scene Flaherty hands his main protagonist Nanook a gramophone record, into which he happily bites.

4.

The liquidity of this border becomes evident in the sphere of blogging, for instance, but also in many other areas where, with increasing convergence, people have come to work as part-time producers for different media.

5.

Immediately preceding the pogrom was the burning of a train in Gujarat that killed around 60 Hindu nationalist activists and that was quickly declared by the BJP to have been a 'jihadist attack'; investigation teams hold that the fire is likely to have been an accident.

6.

Moreover, it suggests, quite contrary to the proclaimed 'visual turn' in much of social science analysis, a significance of language that is anyway always visual when written and that has increased at least as much: digital media, unlike most originally analogue media (cinema, television, radio, photography) are immanently driven by the written language, as otherwise there would be no need for 'e-literacy'.

7.

Ergenekon, which is the name of a valley in the Altai region of Central Eurasia, describes the suspected originally NATO-initiated network of state officials, military members, organized killer squads, the mafia and parts of the media that make up Turkey's infamous 'deep state' – *derin devlet*.

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